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Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
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Saskatchewan

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Log Number: 07-30-139
Week of July 23, 2007

VISION SUCCEEDING FOR PRAIRIE BERRIES

With the addition of 100,000 new trees presently underway, Saskatchewan's own Prairie Berries Inc. is on it's way to becoming the largest saskatoon orchard in the world.

Currently, the orchard founded and operated by Sandy Purdy near Keeler has 10 acres of saskatoons; however, with an investment from an Alberta business partner, the operation will expand by some 120 acres.

"It has always been the company's plan to expand," Purdy said. "Our vision statement from the day we started Prairie Berries was to be recognized worldwide for the supply of saskatoons in the international market." This expansion is certainly a step in the right direction.

Purdy outlined several factors that played a role in the decision to increase the company's size at this point in time. "The market opportunities that are being presented to us by customers, both in the domestic and the international marketplace, have had a major impact in our decision," she stated.

"With that in mind, these opportunities require a guarantee on our part to ensure an adequate supply to our clients year over year. The expansion was a strategy that we undertook to make sure we had a certain volume of supply that we knew we could count on every year."

Prairie Berries currently pulls its supply from 27 growers across all three Prairie provinces. But Purdy says they needed to increase that in order to hit their targets throughout the next five years. The risk was that many of these operations were established as u-pick orchards, so the supply numbers were small and could fluctuate quite a bit from year to year.

"This situation was somewhat threatening to our supply guarantee," she said. "By expanding, we are able to guarantee 40 per cent of our total supply using our own orchard. This brings the risk down considerably."

Purdy feels that saskatoons have become more popular over the years for several reasons. First is an increased awareness brought about by the marketing initiatives of Saskatoon Berry Partners Inc., an organization Purdy formed in 2003 which amalgamates the efforts of over a dozen growers to increase supply and provide added value, both to the market and for the individual growers. Using a value chain management system, the growers are able to work together towards common goals.

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Second, saskatoons hold health properties that are very attractive to consumers. Eating three-quarters of a cup (around 100 grams) of saskatoons provides 24 per cent of the recommended daily intake of fibre. "With trends in the marketplace for more nutritional foods, and demographics looking to change the way people eat, a diet high in fibre can have significant positive health benefits," Purdy suggested.

Third, the antioxidant properties of saskatoons also contribute to improved health. "Research studies that we have done in the past couple of years have proved that saskatoons are about two to three times higher in antioxidants than blueberries," she stated. Although there are several ways to measure antioxidants, the study was done using the Oxygen Radical Absorbance Capacity (ORAC) scalar value.

Fourth, Purdy feels that proactive strategies aimed at changing people's lifestyles and eating habits have helped to create an increased demand for saskatoons.

Purdy says she wants to see Saskatchewan become more self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables. She says that Prairie Berries hopes to contribute to that vision by being recognized as a major player in the overall Saskatoon market with respect to both supply and processing.

Prairie Berries currently has a primary and a secondary processing plant. However, given the projected demand, Purdy says these plants are not big enough to handle the required supply. The company's ideal vision is to consolidate the primary and secondary plants into a single, centralized operation which can handle larger volumes.

With this centralized location, they will not only be able to support their own berries, but other growers who may have market opportunities if they are able to get their berries handled and processed in a federally inspected facility.

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LOW TECH COULD MEAN BIG SAVINGS FOR HOG PRODUCERS

Managing the escalating cost of building hog barns to finish pigs is a real challenge for the pork industry. Construction of a swine barn in Saskatchewan costs $350 to $370 per pig-space compared to $300 to $320 in the United States. As a result, more weanling pigs are shipped to the U.S. for finishing, which has a negative effect on the profitability and long-term stability of the provincial industry.

Sask Pork and the Prairie Swine Centre are looking into low-cost swine housing, based on locally available low-cost building material, as a potential solution.

One promising approach they are investigating is building barns out of bales.

"We undertook a project looking at the possibilities of using contract finishing as a way to increase hog production in Saskatchewan. Through that project, we found that the cost of building a new barn is quite high, and we wanted to look at low-cost methods of producing a structure to house swine," said Mark Ferguson, the Manager of Industry and Policy Analysis with Sask Pork.

"We were approached by a company called C and C Feeders that had a novel idea of using a hybrid structure consisting of flax bale walls and a regular barn roof."

With funding from the Advancing Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food Saskatchewan (ACAAFS) program, Sask Pork is now testing the hybrid barn concept with a prototype building erected near Humboldt.

"The key is to find a structure that provides the same benefits as modern hog barns," Ferguson said. "But you need to be able to maintain the feed efficiency and the feed conversions to be cost-effective. Instead of liquid manure, this barn uses a straw-based system."

The critical factors that must be controlled in a finishing barn are temperature and humidity, according to Ferguson. With the bale structure, air flow is managed by opening and closing tarp covers at the entrances, and through the flax bale walls, instead by high-priced mechanical ventilation.

"The primary variable we are testing here is the temperature in the barn throughout the summer and winter, in terms of productivity, and how the hogs coming out of the facility measure up," Ferguson stated. "The bales provide pretty good insulation. The question is the management of humidity, especially in the winter. Our theory is that moisture may be able to pass through the bales, which could be a very large advantage."

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The design of the flax bale structure suggests that its cost efficiency would be a substantial improvement over traditional hog barns. It has been estimated that , instead of $350 per pig-space, the cost of this new concept could come in as low as $150 per pig-space.

The Prairie Swine Centre is providing technical expertise and helping to measure the outcomes of the project. Funding allows for a two-year time frame, with the final report on the flax bale barn expected to be filed in 2009.

Ferguson says the hog sector has been growing steadily over the past few years. At last count, 2.6 million pigs were being raised each year in an estimated 430 Saskatchewan barns.

Sask Pork is aiming to find innovative approaches that will allow producers to finish more of their pigs here, rather than shipping them to out-of-province destinations. If the bale structure proves feasible, it could help reduce the capital costs of the barns, thereby reducing total production costs.

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AGRICULTURE STILL A KEY PART OF SASKATOON EXHIBITION

Residents of Saskatoon and surrounding area are in for a treat the week of August 7 to 12. The annual Saskatoon Exhibition hosted by Prairieland Park will be in full swing all week long, with the promise of a pleasurable, fun-filled experience for all ages.

Mark Regier, the CEO of Prairieland Park Corporation, says the fair has been an institution in the city since 1886, even though it has grown and changed in many ways over its lifetime.

"It started out as a summer fair with a lot of different events focused around agriculture," Regier stated. "Through the years, it has evolved to include many different types of attractions. Plus, we have a lot of exciting shows, showcases and activities, on top of the carnival and the midway. We always try to bring out the latest in entertainment."

But Regier is quick to add that the exhibition has stayed true to its roots with a number of agricultural and prairie attractions. One of its most popular traditions is the Canadian Professional Chuckwagon Races, a world-class competition that will be back again at this year's event. "It's a Saskatchewan favourite, and a very popular draw to our event," he said.

Horse enthusiasts will also enjoy the Graham Sisters trick riding performance, a new feature for 2007. The Ken Jen Racing Pigs are another attraction that always provides audiences with a lot of laughs.

"We feel that we have programming for kids, teenagers and young adults, right through to seniors, so we are hoping that all ages will attend," Regier noted.

"The fair is primarily a community celebration. It's a chance to come out and see your friends and neighbours, and to celebrate your community."

This year's event features a cross-section of entertainment. Nickelback, a band with over 23 million records sold worldwide and numerous album, radio and video accolades, will headline opening night.

Country recording artist Corb Lund, as well as Kim Mitchell, Hedley, and the Doodlebops, a pop band for pre-school kids, are also set to perform over the course of the exhibition.

Other popular attractions include a first-class midway, a Saskatchewan youth talent competition, a strongman challenge, a demolition derby, a comedic hypnotist and the "Super Dogs" show.

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Those who enjoy the arts and crafts will find entertainment at the Showcase of Arts, which features works of fine art, photography and creative home art.

"Plus, there are fireworks every night. We try to have a little bit for everybody here to see and do," Regier stated.

To get in on the fun and excitement, Superpass tickets can be purchased before and during the exhibition. These include gate admission and midway rides for any one day, and can be purchased at any Safeway or Mac's convenience store. Prices vary depending on the date purchased.

For more information regarding this year's fun-filled event, visit the fair's website at www.saskatoonexhibition.ca.

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GRAZING CROP RESIDUE A GOOD WAY TO CUT FEED COSTS

It's only mid-summer, but it's not too early for beef producers to plan ahead for fall grazing with their cattle herds.

In Saskatchewan, we produce massive amounts of straw and chaff each year after combining. Field grazing of these residues can provide very economical nutrition for beef cows during the fall and winter months.

When annual crops are grown and harvested for seed, the crop residue is essentially a by-product generated at no extra cost. The cheapest and easiest method of using these residues as cattle feed is field piling or field collection with an attachment on the combine, followed by field grazing.

A manufacturer in Alberta has taken the concept of crop residue bunching to a new level by inventing a tool called the "Whole Buncher." The device looks somewhat like a giant pitchfork attached to the back of a combine. It collects the chaff and straw and dumps the material in piles approximately three feet high, four feet wide, and five feet long. The unit trips automatically and resets back into place with a counter balance weight.

Lorne Klein, a Forage Development Specialist with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF), says the device offers a unique spin on the idea of using harvest remnants for feeding cattle. "Instead of the crop residue being baled and hauled to the cattle, the piles are left in the field for the livestock to graze on during fall and winter," Klein explained.

"This reduces the amount of fuel that would ordinarily need to be burned in the feed production process. As a result, it's a much 'greener' approach, and it reduces the input costs to the farmer."

Klein points out that a producer in Saskatchewan has taken the same concept and built a unit to collect the chaff only. The chaff piles are approximately one foot high, four feet wide, and three feet long.

During fall and winter, the crop residue piles can be grazed exclusively or supplemented depending on the feed quality and the nutritional requirements of the cows. If the piles are properly managed and cleaned up, there is no problem with any residual field trash causing difficulties during seeding the following spring.

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But Klein says there are a few considerations that farmers need to take into account before moving to a feeding system that includes crop residue grazing.

First, since cattle will be turned out to graze, the fields will need to be fenced, at least temporarily. "An electric fence is usually a low-cost option," he noted.

Second, the field will require a water source. However, Klein says that, under the right conditions, snow can serve as an alternative source of water on fields without a creek, dugout or well. "It's been scientifically proven that cows that have been properly conditioned can survive on snow, provided you have at least three to four inches of it and it's relatively soft."

Third, some form of shelter will be needed to protect the animals from high winds if they are to graze there through cold weather. Shelter can take the form of natural barriers like bushes, trees or a creek area, or a portable windbreak that the farmer puts up for protection.

Producers interested in obtaining more information on the Whole Buncher crop residue collector or on other approaches to field grazing can contact Lorne Klein at (306) 848-2382 or lklein@agr.gov.sk.ca.

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FRUIT TOUR TO DISCUSS NEW MARKETS AND TECHNIQUES

The Irrigation Development Branch of Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF) will be hosting a Fruit Tour in Outlook during the afternoon of July 31.

The event will outline potential markets and irrigation techniques to aid current fruit growers and recruit new growers to the expanding sector.

The tour comes at a time when new markets are emerging in the fruit industry and growers require knowledge in various areas to maximize their potential.

The tour is open to anyone with an interest in fruit. However, as Lana Shaw, an irrigation agrologist with SAF, explained, "The focus is on potential commercial growers and individuals who want to be in the business of producing or processing fruit."

Many aspects of the fruit industry will be highlighted at the event. "The main purpose is to provide individuals who might be interested in becoming fruit producers with the information, tools and services that they need to do the job," Shaw stated.

One of the foci is on commercial production, which entails using large-scale fruit production to make a commercial impact on the economy.

The event begins with a tour of the Canada-Saskatchewan Irrigation Diversification Centre orchard, which will feature strawberry crowns, saskatoon rejuvenation, sour cherries, haskap (blue honeysuckle), a fruit harvester demonstration, and research on fruit dehydration.

Growers will then tour the J.W.D. Market Garden, receive information on orchard irrigation, and view an agroforestry demonstration project.

"We will have information from a number of different production associations. The Canadian Cherry Producers and Haskap Canada will be represented, so growers will be able to get a snapshot of what is happening in the industry and where they might fit in," Shaw noted.

"We are also going to be highlighting some of the government services that are available, both provincially and federally, to help people make the business plans and come up with the financing to start a new venture like this."

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A couple of important industry individuals will serve as guest speakers at the event. Larry White with the Saskatchewan Forestry Centre is involved in agroforestry using orchards. He will be providing an update on a trade mission that recently returned from Japan, where promising potential new markets for haskaps have been located.

Bruce Hill from the Canadian Cherry Producers Inc. will also discuss a study conducted for cherry primary processing plants and outline plans that are being considered for the industry's future based on the findings.

The tour is expected to give current and potential fruit growers the opportunity to discover the latest developments in the industry, including new fruit markets and updated irrigation techniques.

More information is available at the Saskatchewan Fruit Growers website at www.saskfruit.com, or by calling the Irrigation Development Branch of SAF at (306) 867-5500.

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